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Painting American frontiers: "encounter" and the borders of American identity in nineteenth-century art

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Painting American Frontiers: "Encounter" and the Borders of American Identity in Nineteenth-Century Art

David Peters Corbett

Beginning their 2008 survey history of American art, *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity*, the co-authors, Angela L. Miller, Janet C. Berlo, Bryan J. Wolf and Jennifer L. Roberts, set out the most widely accepted, or at least widely deployed, argument for "encounter" as a key term of comprehension in the American context. "America has attracted people from all over the globe and has become the forefront of cultural encounter among the peoples of the world," they write, "our arts embody this" (MILLER *et al.*, 2008, p. xii; **fig. 1**).

Whether America really is "the forefront of cultural encounter among the peoples of the world" is of course debatable, but the general point is hard to argue with. As the authors of *American Encounters* point out, America from the first has been a country, and later a nation, of diverse ethnic and cultural traditions, "American art […] has developed from a series of contacts, confrontations, and compromises between cultural traditions and across cultural boundaries" (MILLER *et al.*, 2008, p. 655). In keeping with the trend of much recent scholarship, the emphasis of *American Encounters* responds to this situation by concentrating on the history of "cross-cultural exchange" in America, and on "the mixing and merging of traditions." The weight that might be given to investigation of individual cultural traditions as discrete or independent phenomena within a multi-cultural America is downplayed accordingly, while that situation is read backwards as defining all of American history: "heterogeneous mixture is not a new American story at all" (MILLER *et al.*, 2008, p. xii).

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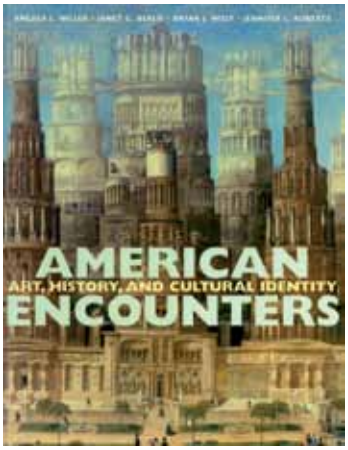


1. Angela L. Miller, Janet C. Berlo, Bryan J. Wolf, Jenifer L. Roberts, *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity*, Upper Saddle River (NJ), 2008.

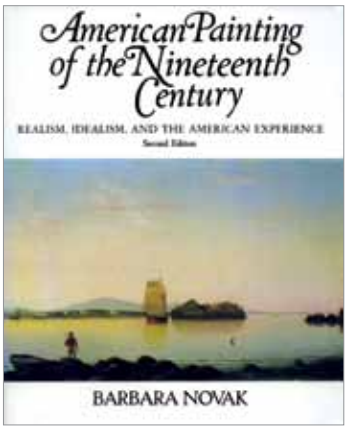
In this essay, I intend both to explore the historiography that Miller and her co-authors are reacting to and to say something about the developments that have made it possible to frame a survey history intended to synthetize and re-present a great deal of varied scholarship in this way. The historiographical perspective through which these scholars see the United States, together with the persistent question of the particularity of its culture(s), have been explored and adapted in varied ways by specialists on the art of nineteenth-century America. Before I go on to examine some key moments in this story, I want to frame the major concerns of the essay. They relate particularly to the idea of the land, and to its settlement and colonization, to contact with other cultures, other places, and other futures, and to how these central facts of the American experience shape the discourses in which further questions are formulated. My subject addresses the strain in nineteenth-century American culture produced by contact with the frontier and with the Other represented by nature and the natural world, the tensions, that is, generated along the borders – both geographical and imagined, both internal and external – of a country struggling to grow into itself.

The encounter with the Other, both in the form of landscape and of social change, has been revealed by a scholarly literature that has examined it as a dynamic and transformative aspect of nineteenth-century America. In what follows, I will examine a number of examples of this historiographical engagement. In doing so, however, I would also like to argue that a perennial topic of art historical methodology has been central to this enquiry. One might formulate the general point like this: how are the circumstances of history, that is to say the making and first consumption of any artwork, related to the work itself, and how does the work give them form and expression? This issue stubbornly underlies the strongly empirical and historical cast of much Anglo-American art history, which grounds its claims on the archival and historical material that it mobilizes to provide an interpretative environment for the work. Rarely are the works expected to comment on that situation, and rarely are they considered outside the conceptual structures that such an approach provides (for an important engagement with the implications of this methodology, see CLARK, 1999). However, it is by no means clear that the link between the art object and its history is either exclusive or outstandingly strong (see FREEDBERG, 1989; BELTING, 1994). Recent scholarly interest has begun to probe the encounter with the work of art outside the historical circumstances of its making and to propose the contrasting idea of pictures as actors in an interpretative dialogue at the moment of engagement by a non-contemporary spectator (see MITCHELL, 2005). This reflects what Norman Bryson once called art history's "double mandate," which is both "archival" and "hermeneutic," including the effort of historical recovery as well as the acknowledgement that the individual encounter with the work is ahistorical to the extent that it occurs in the spectator's present and involves different principles of meaning and response (BRYSON, 1991, p. 72). The questions raised by such a contrast – between the historical conditions of the work and the experience of it in the present – have proved to be as potent in the context of studies of contact as in other areas of art-historical research. I will develop this idea later in a discussion of several individual studies, but, for now, I would like to briefly introduce the historical setting of nineteenth-century American art and to say something about the formation and legacy of its historiography.

American art and its historiography

When George Washington was inaugurated as the first President of the United States in 1789, the country he took charge of comprised no more than a shallow arc on the continental expanse of North America, a bow of land curving down the east coast from New Hampshire to Georgia and extending back only as far as the first range of mountains in the interior. Important states on this line, such as Maine (admitted 1820), Vermont (1791) and Alabama (1819) did not enter the Union immediately, and the first phase of expansion instead saw the United States push over the mountains to incorporate Tennessee (1796), Kentucky (1792), and Ohio (1803). The history of the country in the nineteenth century follows the implications of this push west, not entirely uniformly, given that California was admitted in 1850 while Arizona and New Mexico (both 1912) had to wait for full statehood until the twentieth century, but persistently nonetheless. Marked by a number of key moments – the Louisiana Purchase from Napoleon in 1812, the admission of Texas (1845) then of California, the establishment of the border with Canada (the subject of regular negotiation and adjustment throughout the period) – nineteenth-century American history is the story of the growth and self-determination of the nation. In the process of development, American culture had to come to terms with the impact of a "moving" frontier, with border areas never anchored in a single space but precarious, unfixed, and unstable (TURNER [1894], 1966). This volatile space of national creation provoked a tenacious view of American identity as born from struggle, the action of the will on environment and circumstances, and perhaps as infinitely malleable and subject to elective transformation (SLOTKIN, 1973, 1985, 1992). As the United States expanded into the landscapes and wilderness of its rootless hinterlands, Americans had to grasp the idea of the nation as crucial but proleptic, impermanent in any one phase but always imminent, eternally the creation of future promise (*West as America*, 1991).

This national story, compounded proportionately of growth, change, desire and struggle, has unsurprisingly structured much of the character of art-historical study of the period. When American art historians began in the early twentieth century, soon after the closing of the continental frontier, to turn their attention to the question of their own national art, they were reflecting both an increased sense of self-worth, expressed in part in a belief that art might form part of the saga of the nation's growth, and an anxiety about how far American culture was in fact determined by its European inheritance (GROSECLOSE, WIERICH, 2009; see also HEGEMAN, 1999). American literature also became a subject of investigation at this moment, and "American Renaissance" authors such as Herman Melville (1819-1891), Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864), Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) came to embody the expression of a specifically American national culture thought to have coalesced in the mid-nineteenth century. In a similar way, early- and mid-twentieth century scholars of American art, such as Lloyd Goodrich, director of the Whitney Museum of American Art between 1958 and 1968 (GOODRICH, 1933, GOODRICH, BAUER, 1961), John I. H. Bauer, his successor as director of the Whitney between 1968 and 1974 (BAUER, 1951, GOODRICH, BAUER, 1961), and John McCoubrey, an academic at the University of Pennsylvania (MCCOUBREY, 1963, 1965), also became interested in the ways in which pre-twentieth-century American art and visual culture could be thought of as responsive to the unfolding national story. What was American about American art, and in what ways did it reflect the circumstances



2. Barbara Novak, *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century: Realism, Idealism, and the American Experience*, New York, 1969.

of American experience? How had American culture diverged from its European progenitors, and what did it owe to the realities of American life and the encounter with the land that became the continental United States?

Such questions proved enduring and were given arguably their most cogent and influential response by the art historian Barbara Novak, whose book *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century: Realism, Idealism, and the American Experience* (originally published in 1969 and reprinted in several subsequent editions; **fig. 2**) constituted a highly articulate, evocative and sophisticated presentation of key moments of American art from the colonial period onwards within the context of national identity and expression (NOVAK, 1969, see also NOVAK, 1980, 2007). Throughout her work, Novak sought to identify continuing American traditions and to trace their emergence and legacy. She is interested, therefore, in "the landscape artist's prominent role in the exploration of the American continent" (NOVAK, 1980, p. 137), and in a specifically American "preoccupation with nature" (p. 18) in the "cultural context" of which she wishes to "place American landscape painting" (p. vii) as a central illustration of "the evolution of an American culture and its relation to Western art and culture at large" (p. viii).

As the theme of Novak's 1980 book *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting 1825-1875* suggests, the dominant art form in early- and mid-nineteenth century America, on which the core of this scholarship was built, was the great tradition of landscape painting known as the Hudson River School. The founding figure, Thomas Cole (1801-1848), although born in England, is widely thought to have been the first to define an influential visual language with which to represent American nature (PARRY, 1988), including the character of its social and class construction (*Thomas Cole*, 1994). In the hands of Cole's successors, notably his pupil Frederic Edwin Church (1826-1900) the landscape of America – and indeed, the Americas, since Church influentially painted Ecuador as a symbol of Pan-American nature (MANTHORNE, 1989) – the landscape tradition has been understood as defining the sense of national identity and ambition felt by nineteenth-century Americans (*Frederic Edwin Church…*, 1989). The dominating influence of landscape painting began to wane after the Civil War (1861-1865) as the United States under Reconstruction became a great industrial and urban power (HOWE, 2009). In its place, the new wealth of the American elite and middle classes allowed artists in greater numbers to spend substantial periods of time abroad in Europe, most notably in France, where they were directly influenced by the art and visual cultures they encountered. Painters such as Childe Hassam (1859-1935) brought a French-influenced Impressionism back to the United States, whose cities, leisure activities and landscape they painted with new eyes (*American Impressionism*, 1994; *Childe Hassam*, 2004; ROSENBAUM, 2006). In doing so, artists drew on the important nineteenth-century American genre tradition, which had also served to expose and debate social and national questions (JOHNS, 1991; LUBIN, 1994). The transforming character of American society, as immigration, industrialization, and the growth of urban environments took center stage, came to figure centrally in the work of these and subsequent artists. By the early twentieth century American painting had become an art of the city, with the advent of artists such as Robert Henri (1865-1929) and his pupils who formed the Ashcan School, notably

3. John Sloan, *Hairdresser's Window*, 1907, Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum.

John Sloan (1871-1951; **fig. 3**) and the mid-westerner George Bellows (1882-1925; *Metropolitan Lives*, 1995; ZURIER, 2006; *George Bellows*, 2012). The specifics of American experience and history in the further development of the cities, and in the gradual acquisition of cultural dominance during "the American century," have also been an element in studies of twentieth-century American art (CORN, 1999). Nonetheless, in accounting for the historiography on nineteenth-century American art and in seeking to identify its legacy, the interest in identity, nationhood and cultural specificity derived from the mid-twentieth century study of the landscape tradition remains central (GROSECLOSE, WIERICH, 2009).

Subsequent scholarship on American art has diversified and to an extent relinquished – or certainly struggled with – this central preoccupation with national identity. One forceful consequence of a devotion to the idea of American culture seems to be the risk of narrowing that culture to a single line – elite, Anglophone, protestant and north-eastern – that leaves aside the diverse peoples, religious histories, and traditions that evidently composed America from the first (GILES, 2001, 2010, 2011). As studies of pre-twentieth century American art proliferated, this range of possibility began to emerge as a strong element in the historiography, matched by diversity in methodology and by the foundation of a sophisticated and rich scholarly context. To take one example, the innovative studies of the religious dimension in American visual culture by Sally Promey and others have opened an important and diverse dimension of American life to art-historical scrutiny (PROMEY, 1993; MORGAN, PROMEY, 2001). By the 1980s, the historiography was judged to have "come of age," in Wanda Corn's words (CORN, 1988), and to offer a varied and wide-ranging investigation into the breadth and detail of historic American art (CORN, 1988; GAEHTGENS, ICKSTADT, 1992; DAVIS, 2003; GROSECLOSE, WIERICH, 2009).

Since the 1990s, a growing tendency to repudiate the idea of American exceptionalism has produced some distinguished scholarship. This body of work responds to the interest in "globalization" and the "trans-national" evident in the humanities, and aims to rewrite the historical relationship of America and the world (see, for example, CAMPBELL, KEAN, 1997, p. 2). In this context, the work of the literary scholar Paul Giles, who has examined the United States and its literature from comparatist and global perspectives in an effort to reveal the paradoxical nature of American identity, has played a key role and can be thought of as both incisive and exemplary (GILES, 2001, 2002, 2010, 2011). Writing in *The Global Remapping of American Literature* (GILES, 2011), he states this view through the concept of "deterriorialization" – borrowed from Gilles Deleuze and Féliz Guattari (DELEUZE, GUATTARI, [1972] 1984) – proposed as a breaking apart of the claims that we should study a culturally homogenous, temporally persistent, spatial entity called "the United States." Giles explains: "Deterriorialization, like transnationalism, can be seen as a doubled-up, recursive term that seeks to bracket off or problematize the trope associated

with a prior metanarrative: territory, nation, or homeland. It speaks to a paradoxical situation where affective loyalties, local affiliations, and subliminal legacies are ironically traversed by larger vectors of political and economic disenfranchisement, vectors that threaten to push the nation further and further away from the representative center of its own imagined community. To speak of American literary culture under the rubric of deterriorialization is thus […] to think of it as a socially constructed, historically variable and experientially edgy phenomenon" (GILES, 2011, p. 25). Even such a highly compressed summary makes it clear that Giles' ambitions are to shake up the persistent tropes of exceptionalism and insularity once and for all.

Despite apparent differences, one might argue that this emphasis on heterogeneity has something in common with America's lack of rootedness and supposed "primary, visceral, unbounded vitality," as noted by Jean Baudrillard in a 1986 study. Baudrillard's *America* spoke directly from and to the interests of poststructuralists across a number of disciplines from the 1980s onwards. This version of America is "the *only remaining primitive society*," characterized by "complexity, hybridity, and […] intermingling," which yet lacks "a past through which to reflect on this, and [is] therefore fundamentally primitive" (BAUDRILLARD, [1986] 1988, p. 7). Baudrillard's enthusiasm for America as exotic Other replays a longstanding European fascination, of course, but the trope that sees in American society and culture the constant repetition of the first European encounter with the New World, whereby "everything is to be discovered, everything to be obliterated" (BAUDRILLARD, 1988, p. 9), does little to move forward the terms of analysis. The nature of American encounters, not only within the expanding borders of the United States over the course of the last three centuries and beyond, but also outside those borders, has fascinated much recent scholarship. The twin importance of the specificity of American history and culture and the degree to which America and Americanness can be illuminated by a newly invigorated sense of their place within wider cultural and national comparators helps to define a central tension in the way in which cultural encounter has been seen over the course of recent historiography on nineteenth-century art.

Constructing the American West

Wilderness, Landscape, and Settlement

From the beginning of American Studies as an intellectual project in the 1950s, encounter with the American landmass has been recognized to be a key component of any account of contact between Americans and the Other. Leo Marx long ago noted that the "pastoral ideal has been used to define the meaning of America ever since the age of discovery," and the founding texts of American Studies were profoundly involved with the need to understand how American landscapes were imagined from the materials of the American wilderness (MARX, 1964, p. 3). From Henry Nash Smith to John R. Stilegoe, and from Van Wyck Brooks to Richard Slotkin, commentators on the cultural forces attendant on American landscape have seen the combined processes of discovery, colonization, and settlement as fictions, fluid cultural forms that have constantly probed and sought to define the world before them, and that repeatedly recast themselves anew in response to changing conditions and necessities (SMITH, 1950; BROOKS, 1958; SLOTKIN, 1973, 1985, 1992; STILGOE, 1982). From the first moment of contact, America was, of course, promoted and frequently perceived as a land of possibility and bounty (for a recent discussion, see *New World*, 2007). The contrasting but constant sense, inherited at the same time, of the American landmass as alien, unnervingly vast, and unfathomable, produced a dialogue between its twinned meanings of promise and possibility, so that Cotton Mather's

"Desert Land in America" is offset by a trope of potential in which God's "divine providence hath irradiated an Indian wilderness" (cited in CLARKE, 1993, I, p. 3, referencing MILLER, 1956; see MEYERS, 1993). Such thinking is very evident in the nineteenth century; in Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, who wrote that nature in America was "sleeping, overgrowing, almost conscious, too much by half for man in the picture, and so giving a certain tristesse, like the rank vegetation of swamps and forests seen at night […] and on it man seems not able to make much impression." He goes on to elaborate this "rankness," evoking a disreputable and sinister expanse of terrain that is not quite land, not at least in comparison to the ordered tidiness of European cultural norms: "There, in that great sloven continent, in high Alleghany pastures, in the sea-wide, wide-skirted prairie, still sleeps and murmurs and hides the great mother, long since driven away from the trim hedge-rows and over-cultivated garden of England" (Ralph Waldo Emerson, *English Traits*, XVI, *Stonehenge*, cited in CUNLIFFE, 1974, p. 474).

The Americanist Marcus Cunliffe, who discusses this passage, sees it as evidence that, for Emerson, "nature as an imaginative entity has not yet been brought into focus; the speculative categories, already formulated in Europe, have […] not yet fallen into shape" (CUNLIFFE, 1974, p. 474). But it is also evidence of the otherness, even monstrosity, of American nature in the imaginations of its inhabitants. Emerson's "great mother" is both chthonic, the image of the land, the cause even of a perverse sort of pride, and, exactly because of that, repellent, turning away in her tainted sleep from any human contact. Nature's "almost consciousness" gives rise to a perception of nothing but its indifference. It is this unresponsive, restive, slatternly presence of nature that forces its way onto the attention of the observer in such ambivalent and unfocussed images.

Many scholars employ the term "wilderness" to designate those responses to American nature that identify its salient characteristics as alienness, indifference, and perversity, and which emphasize its untouched or unmanaged quality. Roderick Nash understands its function in *Wilderness and the American Mind* to be essentially a record of disorientation and unhomeliness. For Nash, wilderness is a "primeval" place, prior to, or separate from, the presence of human beings. If they should stumble upon this wild place, imagined as the densely forested habitat of feral creatures, humans find themselves "in an alien environment where the civilization that normally orders and controls […] life is absent" (NASH, 1967, p. 2; see also STILGOE, 1982, p. 7-21). Figuratively therefore, wilderness is "any place in which a person feels stripped of guidance, lost, and perplexed," but the fundamental emphasis falls on it as "desert," space without human presence or authority (NASH, 1967, p. 3). The natural world in this reading is sullen and resistant to human presence; it refuses it entry or seeks to expel it, or it stands at a distance, like Mount Katahdin in Frederick Edwin Church's painting of that name (*Mount Ktaadn*, 1853, New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery; **fig. 4**), as if unconquerable.

4. Frederic Edwin Church, *Mount Ktaadn*, 1853, New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery.

The obverse of that condition in the commentary is often "landscape," the abundant and fertile land that, even where it retains the untouched and unsettled character of wilderness, is already marked out for colonization and becomes transformed by that possibility – both in reality, in due course, and in the imaginative projection of future life – into a principal image of freedom, order and settlement. Stilgoe, for example, proposes an opposition between wilderness and *landschaft*, that is between the place of wildness, bewilderment and supernatural terror, and its "antithesis […] the land shaped by men" (STILGOE, 1982, p. 12). "Landscape" here signifies those qualities of the wilderness that are domesticated and made over as conducive to human life. It is what emerges once the land is cultivated and brought under the rule of human demands for order and productivity. Both these views of the natural are best seen as fictions, culturally specific ways of understanding the world that are given form in representation. The wilderness appears in many paintings as the residue of what is rejected in imagining the ordered landscape of settlement. Emerson's famous lines declaring that "America is a poem in our eyes," so that "its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and […] will not wait long for meters," suggest both these perspectives: the optimism of settlement and the world's capacity to shock and repel, as well as the capacity of representation – a "poem in our eyes" – to oblige that world to yield to its requirements and thus to sustain the process of imaginative representation (cited in FENDER, 1981, p. 5, referencing EMERSON, 1844).

To these two terms, "wilderness" and "landscape," one might add a third, "settlement," one that is equally subject to the human imagination. The role of settlement as an image of the transformation of wilderness into civilization has a foundational role in Euro-American culture and is manifest in the context of nineteenth-century development (NASH, 1967; STILGOE, 1982). Discussing Frederick Jackson Turner's famous or notorious concept of the American frontier as central to the self-definition of the nation, Richard Slotkin notes that in the "world of […] Turner's Frontier Thesis," there is "a distinctive bifurcated geography. It is divided between two realms: the 'Metropolis,' the civilizational center; and the 'Wilderness,' into which the heroic energies of the Metropolis are projected. The 'Frontier' is the ever advancing line that is the interface between these realms" (SLOTKIN, 1985, p. 41); or, as Turner himself put it, "the outer edge of the wave – the meeting point between savagery and civilization" (TURNER [1894] 1966, p. 200). Slotkin's analysis responds to the spectacular growth of cities and urbanized centers in the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century and to its even sharper acceleration from the Civil War onwards. By the admittedly modest definition of "urban" employed by the United States Bureau of the Census – that is, places with more than 2,500 people – the thirty years between 1820 and 1850 saw American urban centers grow fivefold, a figure that looks starker still when converted into percentages of the total population; indeed, city dwellers grew from 7 percent to 18 percent of the whole (*Howe*, 2009, p. 526). The number of major cities in the United States – those with populations over 25,000 – rose over the same period from five in 1820 to twenty-six in 1850, while New York lost its status as the sole metropolis (defined as a city with a population in excess of 100,000) and was joined by five new peers. Alongside internal migration from the hinterlands of emergent urban centers and from far beyond, migration from Europe helped New York (the major port of entry) triple in size in the first half of the nineteenth century, "growing twice as fast as Liverpool and three times as fast as Manchester" (HOWE, 2009). This sharp pattern of growth was repeated in other cities as the United States expanded, while New York itself was acknowledged as a world city by

the mid-nineteenth century (BURROWS, WALLACE, 1999). In a country where individual farmsteads and an abundance of space were in most places the norm, such concentrations of humanity appeared both novel and provocative. But the new cities were not just the beneficiaries of industrialization and migration; there were deeper and ultimately more consequential developments than the visible accumulation and movement of the population.

The Creation of Landscape

The dialectic between the natural and the landscape, between the unprocessed and primary state of the world and its improved condition as a result of human intervention, therefore plays a defining role in American attitudes to the wilderness and its management. What have scholars made of this unfolding background when it comes to the study of nineteenth-century American art? Art historians such as Ellwood C. Parry III have examined the ways in which the emergence of what was to become the Hudson River School of landscape painting in the early work of Thomas Cole around 1825 was influenced by the existing preoccupations of the Knickerbocker writers active in New York City from a decade earlier (PARRY, 1988). Writers such as William Cullen Bryant, Washington Irving and James Fennimore Cooper found space in their work for evocations of the Hudson River and New England landscape (CALLOW, 1967; PARRY, 1988; AVERY, 2000; *Intimate Friends*, 2000). In James Fennimore Cooper's 1823 novel *The Pioneers: Or, the Sources of the Susquehanna*, he gives what has been described as a "highly Oedipal" account of the development of Cooperstown (BRADBURY, 1995, p. 45), the settlement near Lake Oswego in Upper New York State founded by his father. Elizabeth Temple, Cooper's stand-in, observes the setting of Templeton, "a scene which was so rapidly altering under the hands of man, that it only resembled, in its outlines, the picture she had so often studied, with delight, in childhood" (COOPER, [1823] 1988, p. 40). The text continues: "Immediately beneath them lay a seeming plain, glittering, without inequality, and buried in mountains. […] Although the evergreens still held dominion over many of the hills that rose on this side of the valley, yet the undulating outlines of the distant mountains, covered with forests of beech and maple, gave a relief to the eye, and the promise of a kinder […] though so rapid were the changes, and so persevering the labors of those who had cast their fortunes to the success of the enterprise, that it was not difficult for the imagination of Elizabeth to conceive they were enlarging under her eye, while she was gazing, in mute wonder, at the alterations that a few short years had made in the aspect of the country" (COOPER, [1823] 1988, p. 40).

Washington Irving's vision of America in *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent* (1819-1820) presents the land in a related way, combining a nascent nationalism with the sense of a natural prospect both untouched and available. Here though, there is no need even to depict a settlement; the observing author serves as the embodiment of the civilized seizure of the land in Irving's text. He evokes America's "mighty lakes, like oceans of languid silver; her mountains, with their bright aerial tints; her valley, teeming with wild fertility, her tremendous cataracts, thundering in their solitudes; her boundless plains, wavering with spontaneous verdure; her broad, deep rivers, rolling in solemn silence to the ocean; her trackless forests, where vegetation puts forth all its magnificence; her skies, kindling with the magic of summer clouds and glorious sunshine" (cited in CLARKE, 1993, I, p. 29).

Irving's encomium – its gendered language of possession continuous with that later deployed by Emerson – makes it clear that wilderness and landscape are matters of perspective. The same land that might seem a trackless and alien desert, bewildering and

disorienting those who encounter it, can also represent the full potential of settlement. It is only a matter of taking it, in a gesture that is textual and visual as much as it is physical (see comments on the complexity of wilderness and its contrasted meanings in NASH, 1967, p. 4).

These concepts, and something of the language they generated, found their way into the new indigenous landscape painting of the early years of the century. Cole's 1836 "Essay on American Scenery" famously takes a similar view: "The painter of American scenery has, indeed, privileges superior to any other. All nature here is new to art. No Tivolis, Ternis, Mount Blancs, Plinlimmons, hackneyed and worn by the daily pencils of hundreds; but primeval forests, virgin lakes and waterfalls, feasting his eye with new delights, and filling his portfolio with their features of beauty and magnificence, hallowed to his soul by their freshness from the creation for our own favored pencil" (NOBLE, 1964, p. 42).

Nationhood, God's promise to the colonizers of America, and the wilderness, all come together here to assert a vision of the professional utility of the New World for the landscape painter. But Cole's vision is already an account of transformation. Like Irving, the perspective his rhetoric adopts takes a long look forward into the future. The entire emotional emphasis of this passage falls on what will happen once those "favored pencils" get busy, transforming the pre-existing world into fodder for impending representation.

Cole's "Essay" deploys the language of possession and seizure from the perspective of the painter's eye. But Cole also made an exemplary image of mediation at the meeting point of nature and settlement in the *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm – The Oxbow* (1836, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art; **fig. 5**). The picture juxtaposes wilderness and settlement but also inserts a third term, in the figure of the artist perched on the bluff at the center left of the composition. The observer, or interpreter, of the scene, whose perception in Cole's case makes visible the iconographic meanings of national promise, is both the stand-in for settlement as a dynamic and transforming action and an instance of a common figure, widespread in the art and visual culture of the American landscape, who overlooks or contemplates the scene and in doing so brings it into both perspective and being.

Cole's painting has been seen by Oswaldo Rodriguez Roque as manifesting a "conceptual and metaphorical approach to the representation of landscape features. Though overall, general faithfulness to the scenery represented is maintained, the picture is fundamentally the product of Cole's transforming vision" (ROQUE, 1982, p. 73). It is the conceptualization of the landscape that such figures embody, the intellectual appropriation of the meanings that the landscape under human control can acquire, that signifies most strongly here. *The Oxbow* shows wilderness and its transformation because these things are mental terms, ways of looking at and understanding the natural

5. Thomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm – The Oxbow*, 1836, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

and man-made worlds that, characteristically, are here laid out before the contemplating and active eye of the painter whose act of transcription onto the canvas is as fully a part of the transformation of American nature into a national identity as any action of the plow or axe. Such a role for the artist makes encounter above all a question of representation. Fixed within the structures offered by the primary encounter with the American landmass and its dialogue between the bountiful and the alien, representation of encounter becomes both a fictive recasting of actual cultural contact and the occasion for assertion of the role of painting in America.

The Frontier and the Other

The so-called "Frontier Thesis" elaborated by the historian Frederick Jackson Turner in 1894 has had an enduring influence on readings of American experience (TURNER, [1894] 1966). Turner's proposal – that the "moving line" of the frontier over the course of the history of the United States and its founding colonies – created the cultural character of America and formed it for the future, has been revised and rethought without ever entirely departing from its founding terms (SLOTKIN, 1973, 1985, 1992). The art of the West as the art of this moving frontier has also been the subject of revisionist readings over the last twenty years. The key text here is the catalog for exhibition *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920*, which caused considerable debate when it appeared for its straightforward acknowledgement of the West as a scene for conquest and exploitation (*West as America*, 1991). The catalog, like the exhibition itself, adopted a nuanced and sophisticated attitude to important artworks in the American tradition, seeking to revise its readers' and viewers' understanding by re-situating the West in the context of social, economic, and representational economies that are often ignored.

Other scholars have extended this revisionist undertaking (see WOLF, 1982 for an important postmodernist reading). In Alexander Nemerov's study of a key western artist, Frederick Remington, the author reads Remington in part as an Aestheticist painter whose work demonstrates a strong collision between the assertion of "western" virtues and the claims of paint (NEMEROV, 1995). In this context, studies of Hudson River School painters such as Albert Bierstadt have also extended their readings to take into account the broader accounts provided of western works (*Primal Visions*, 2001). Angela Miller's compellingly rich and sophisticated reading of the landscape tradition in her *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875* has arguably brought the nationalist reading of landscape if not to a close, then to a point where further innovation will be necessary in order to return the question to the center of the historiographical stage. Miller produces both the most accomplished and the most transformative version of the landscape as nation argument, locating its relevance in a sharply defined account of the ambivalent cultural politics of the time (MILLER, 1993). Her book opens with the assertion that, between 1825 and the 1870s, "images of the American landscape carried a new weight of national meaning for contemporary audiences" (MILLER, 1993, p. 1). Miller immediately introduces a qualification, however, by pointing out that this body of work has a "production, patronage, and exhibition structure […] focused in the Northeast," and that it is therefore hard to use "the inclusive term American" without being "wary" (p. 1, note 1). A little later in her discussion, Miller describes her methodology as "inclined to discover multiple and often competing motives where our predecessors took things at face value" and to doubt "claims to unitary and coherent structures of meaning in works of art," finding "deeper ambivalence and complexity often running counter to surface rhetoric" (p. 19). She also introduces a significant

difference between her own position – specifically a new, generational one – and "nationalism," saying that "I came of age at a time when the concept of nationalism was (and is) highly suspect" (p. 19). The result is a book that looks at the body of evidence on nineteenth-century landscape in a revisionist way. Its re-reading of the material as complex and ambivalent has influenced much subsequent interest in the issues.

An artist such George Caleb Bingham (1811-1879), who was based in St. Louis, Missouri, during the 1840s and 1850s, at a time when the frontier was very close, can be seen as exemplary from the point of view of the historiography that has built up around his life and work. Many of the perspectives I havent described have been read as receiving a compelling visual expression in the paintings Bingham made of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers between 1845 and 1857. These images present the rivers' flatboatmen and traders as heroic figures, frozen in time on still or minimally flowing liquid surfaces (for an innovative and relevant discussion of competing types of time in the Early Republic, see ALLEN, 2008). Paintings such as *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri* (1845, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art; **fig. 6**), *The Jolly Flatboatmen* (1846, Manoogian Collection, on loin to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; **fig. 7**), or *Jolly Flatboatmen in Port* (1857, St. Louis, Saint Louis Art Museum; **fig. 8**), are mysterious in their affect, but scholars like those mentioned below have shown they are also responsive to the political culture and economic circumstances of their time. The static quality in the images may thus be read as a response to the friction in American culture generated by contact with the frontier and with the Other represented by nature and the natural world (interestingly, for instance, by LUBIN, 1994). It both reflects the tension between the new, progressive, industrializing antebellum America and older forms of economic activity, and offers some access to the alternative way of life of the flatboatmen. As this implies, the relationship of the rivers to development is itself raised by these pictures. Bingham's paintings are fluid and indeterminate, addressing but not resolving the issues around contact, interior barriers, and historical connectivity that I have identified in the literature on contact and encounter.

Michael Edward Shapiro makes the interesting suggestion that *Fur Traders*, "with its air of an unreal journey," might be seen as "a Western equivalent" of Cole's *The Voyage of Life* (1842, Washington D.C., National Gallery of Art; **fig. 9**; SHAPIRO, 1993, p. 46; for a precisely opposite opinion, see LUBIN, 1994, p. 59). Cole had stated that "The Boat, composed of figures of the Hours, images the thought, that we are borne on the hours down the Stream of Life. The Boat identifies the subject in each picture" (NOBLE, 1853, p. 287; see WALLACH, 1977). Each of the four paintings in the series is devoted to one stage of life, from childhood through youth and manhood to old age, and the pictures are linked together by the common imagery of the boat moving down a river, from

6. George Caleb Bingham, *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri*, 1845, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

7. George Caleb Bingham, *The Jolly Flatboatmen*, 1846, Manoogian Collection, on loan to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

8. George Caleb Bingham, *Jolly Flatboatmen in Port*, 1857, St. Louis, Saint Louis Art Museum.

the cave mouth that gives birth to the protagonist to the smoky waters through which he is ultimately translated to the afterlife. Bingham's version, if we take up Shapiro's suggestion for a moment, steps away from Cole's moralizing framework and from the textual explication and dramatic realization of the painting that is central to Cole's mode of operation. The voyage of life in Bingham's work, if that is what it is, is now detached from a structuring meaning and infused with a mysterious sense of enterprise adrift on the waters of the world.

Such a reading of these paintings seems on the face of it to cut across what we know from the detailed historical accounts of Bingham's political career in Missouri. Shapiro argues that, as "an ardent Whig," "the connection between commerce and politics merges in [Bingham's] paintings of life along the river" (SHAPIRO, 1990, p. 155). At exactly the time he made these paintings, Bingham was seeking election to the Missouri General Assembly in 1846, an aim in which he finally succeeded in 1848. Nancy Rash, in the most developed of the scholarly explorations of Bingham as a politician, places the river paintings, including the first version of *The Jolly Flatboatmen*, in the context of a complex set of political maneuverings by Missouri Whigs – including Bingham – to persuade the Democratic federal government under President James Polk to provide funding for improving the rivers and clearing impediments and obstructions. Rash characterizes the flatboatmen as representative of the commerce of the river and vital to its economic life and well being. Nonetheless, it is clear that the wealth of St. Louis as "the major trading center in the West" at this time was dependent on the navigability of steamboat traffic and not directly on the flatboats (RASH, 1991, p. 75). Indeed, their "importance […] in the economic life of Missouri" was due to the "key role" they played "in fueling the steamboat" (RASH, 1991, p. 82). Rash convincingly demonstrates how these

9. Thomas Cole, *The Voyage of Life: Youth*, 1842, Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art.

10. Robert S. Duncanson, *Blue Hole, Flood Waters, Little Miami River*, 1851, Cincinnati, Cincinnati Art Museum.

flatboat paintings – in which wrecked steamboats feature – provide a moralized setting for reflection on the snags and hazards of the river as impediments to its role as a vital commercial waterway, and she argues for Bingham as a vigorous Whig developer, with his eyes set on the contemporary and future development of Missouri. She additionally discusses the political symbolism of the canoe in *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri* and *Boatmen on the Missouri*, as well as references to the visual culture of Whig politics in their iconography (RASH, 1991, p. 52-53 and p. 80-81).

In a related but distinct discussion of the political dimension in Bingham, Bryan J. Wolf has seen the paintings as "mythmaking," by which he means they express an ideology, "a point of view, a way of seeing, that comes to substitute for history" (WOLF, 1995, p. 262). Disguising the ideological work of seeing as the innocent recording operation of the eye, Bingham, according to Wolf, promotes a view of pre-industrial values even as industrialization comes to dominate the riverscapes he paints, naturalizing and effacing class as social fact in favor of an asserted "fantasy" of innocent labor (WOLF, 1995, p. 257, 258). Angela Miller has also seen Bingham's work as ideological, negotiating the delicate relationship and intended "integration" between the north east and the West (MILLER [Angela], 1993, p. 113). Françoise Forster-Hahn and David Lubin are directly engaged with Bingham's paintings as "symbols of the Expanding nation" (FORSTER-HAHN, 1992; LUBIN, 1994; see also HUSCH, 1998, for a national reading of one of Bingham's non-river paintings). In the historiography, Bingham's luminous, compelling paintings therefore become elements in the national story, as well as moments of major consequence in the dialogue that unfolded across nineteenth-century American culture between development and exploitation on the one hand and the pre-industrial on the other. They also testify to the power of painting in the nineteenth century to shape these facts and to manage them and their representation. Bingham's paintings of mysterious flatboatmen in leisure and in labor confront an Other and offer his spectators a way of assuaging that fact.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that "encounter" is a relative word. The emphasis by Angela Miller and her co-authors on "contacts, confrontations, and compromises between cultural traditions and across cultural boundaries" as the defining quality in American experience implies that the encounter operates from all sides (MILLER *et al.*, 2008, p. 655). Although my research expertise necessarily defines the scope of this essay, I am not presenting that focus as an exclusive perspective on the nineteenth-century context. Native-American responses to European settlement, for example, have been a vigorous area of scholarly enquiry, and studies have concentrated on both the nature of the colonial experience, and on questions of identity, cultural persistence and change, and authenticity (BERLO, PHILLIPS, 1998; RUSHING, 1999; SHOEMAKER, 2002). Other studies have positioned

the experience of Native Americans within the broader European cultures of the expanding nineteenth-century nation (BERLO, 1992; CONN, 2004; DEVON, 2006). Studies of the important African-American landscape artist Robert S. Duncanson have also debated questions of race and identity in the context of elite systems of representation (KETNER, 1993; LUBIN, 1994; *Robert S. Duncanson*, 1995; **fig. 10**). Recent work on the many expatriate African-American artists, such as Henry Ossawa Tanner who spent the majority of his career in Paris although he exhibited in the United States, have concentrated on the interaction with the European tradition and the implications of that relationship for American and African-American artists (*Sharing Traditions*, 1985; BERNIER, 2008; *Henry Ossawa Tanner*, 2012).

Outside the borders: nationalism and the making of historical meaning

If the scholarship I have just discussed has concentrated on the internal borders of the United States, whether geographical or psychological, another strand of research has looked at relationships beyond those borders. A number of art historians have taken as subject the connections between the Americas manifested in the great landscape tradition of the mid-nineteenth century. Frederick Edwin Church's towering pictures of Ecuador, such as the various views of the live volcano Cotopaxi – *Cotopaxi* (1855, Houston, Museum of Fine Arts; 1855, Washington, D.C., Smithsonian American Art Museum; 1862, Detroit, Detroit Institute of Arts), and *The Heart of the Andes* (1859, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art; **fig. 11**) – staged their sublime evocation of American nature beyond the geographical boundaries of the United States. Katherine Emma Manthorne's invaluable 1989 monograph, *Tropical Renaissance: North American Artists Exploring Latin America, 1839-1879*, takes the core years of the nineteenth-century and traces the fascination of artists like Church for the land and scenery of their American neighbors, what she calls "the luxuriant and terrible beauty of these regions" (MANTHORNE, 1989, p. 1-2). Analyzing works by Church, Martin Johnson Heade, James McNeil Whistler, Louis Mignot and a large number of lesser known but significant American artists of these years, Manthorne offers a view of the unfolding

11. Frederic Edwin Church, *Heart of the Andes*, 1859, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

history of American responses to Latin America in the visual field. "Why did large numbers of artists from the United States travel in Latin America?" asks Manthorne (p. 3). Concluding that "from 1839 to 1879 major painters began to define the boundaries of the American landscape not only in national but also in hemispheric terms," she argues that for mid-nineteenth-century Americans, Latin America was less a foreign region than a junior partner in the American "family," a perspective that produced an "increasingly proprietorial" feeling towards the southern extension of the continent (p. 3-4). Manthorne warns, however, against any simple equation between the broad range of visual responses to the south she identifies and the expansionism of US foreign policy of the time. Indeed, there is a fascinating subtlety in interpretation to be investigated. Possessing Latin America as "spiritual property," US artists arriving there nevertheless found themselves at the mercy of profound cultural differences, which made it "difficult to assimilate" Latin America into their "concept of America." "In this precarious mix that Latin America presented to [the US artist] of self and other, familiar and foreign," writes Manthorne, "lies the uniqueness of this encounter" (p. 5). Her study traces the consequences of this situation, and relates the exploration US artists conducted in the south to the studies of important and influential nineteenth-century scientists such as Louis Agassiz and Alexander von Humboldt.

This theme was explored in depth by Kevin J. Avery in the context of Church's magnificent and important picture, *The Heart of the Andes*. Avery sees Church's early painting of the northeastern United States as evoking much wider geographical contexts. Of *New England Scenery* (1851, Springfield [MA], George Walter Vincent Smith Art Museum), Avery argues that this painting "signaled the ambition culminating in *The Heart of the Andes* [...] The subject may have been local, but the feeling of the picture was continental. […] This New England evokes the West, an association strengthened by the Conestoga wagon in the foreground, pointed towards the sunset" (*Church's Great Picture*, 1993, p. 17). Tracing Church's two trips to South America in 1853 and 1857, inspired by a translation of *Cosmos* (1849) by the great German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt, Avery draws out the importance of

12. Albert Bierstadt, *The Rocky Mountains*, 1863, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Pan-American nature for Church as an assertion of both national identity through American nature and his own growth as an important American painter. Avery additionally extends the scope of discussion by signaling the impact of Church's work "on American frontier art and its prime representative," Albert Bierstadt (p. 49). Discussing Bierstadt's painting *The Rocky Mountains* (1863, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art; **fig. 12**), Avery asserts that "Bierstadt's inaugural splash in the arena of frontier art at the very least tested Church's leadership in American landscape painting" (p. 50), to which it deliberately opposed itself. Bierstadt's showmanship and capacity to bring the sublime out of South America and into the United States itself, while evoking the westward push through his introduction of the presence of Native Americans and his legible, highly managed depiction of American, western nature as a stage setting, offered an important development beyond Church's Pan-American contact (*Primal Visions*, 2001).

Another view of the major versions of the south by mid-nineteenth-century American artists appears in a suggestive essay by a social scientist, anthropologist Deborah Poole, whose 1998 "Landscape and the Imperial Subject: US Images of the Andes, 1859-1930," reviews the meanings of three images: Church's 1859 *Heart of the Andes*, an 1868 engraving by archaeologist Ephraim George Squier, and a photograph taken in 1913 by the politician Hiram Bingham. For Poole, all three of these images signal the subtle interaction of visual regimes, imperial ideology and uncertain responses to the tensions and possibilities of an expanding American world. Intriguingly, Poole is more relaxed than many art historians might be about taking the aesthetic impact of these works into account in explaining their ideological power. In the last analysis, for Poole it is their aesthetic that, expressing "lived and inchoate reality as feeling and emotion," formed "the cement linking the individual consumer of images and ideas to the very colonial and imperial enterprise of expansion that had made possible such 'modern' ways of seeing" (POOLE, 1998, p. 133).

A further – and very different category – of the scholarship on extraterritorial representation concerns the European dimension of the cultural outreach of nineteenth-century US artists. The National Gallery, London, held an exhibition in 2006 called *Americans in Paris, 1860-1900*, which is a good example of a subject that continues to regularly attract scholarly attention. The exhibition and its accompanying catalogue (*Americans in Paris*, 2003) present Paris as a training ground for a startlingly large number of aspiring American painters and sculptors, "at least 1,000 in one year, 1888, alone": "Paris was where artistic maturity was attained, where reputations and friends were made and collectors found" (ADLER, 2006, p. 11). It was the modernity of Paris that attracted these artists, as well as the opportunity to train in the ateliers of leading French painters. The enormous numbers of Americans who made this artistic pilgrimage help to identify the moment when US ambition began to look out at the world beyond the Americas for cultural expansion (see, for instance, COHEN-SOLAL, 2001; MOORE, 2003). A key element in this story is the development of American artists' colonies at Giverny and elsewhere, a subject that was pursued in 2003 in an exhibition at the Oklahoma City Museum of Art titled *Americans in Paris, 1850-1910: The Academy, the Salon the Studio, and the Artists' Colony* and in associated studies, including the exhibition *Paris 1889: American Artists at the Universal Exhibition* (*Americans in Paris*, 2003; *Paris 1889*, 1989). Artistic interchange between America and Europe remains an important scholarly concern in studies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries despite the concurrent interest in internal boundaries and the interaction of multiple internal cultures (CRUNDEN, 1993; GAEHTGENS, ICKSTADT, 1992, CORBETT, MONKS, 2012).

Imaginary geographies: nature as an expression of cultural phenomena

Elsewhere, scholars have been interested by what those looking in at America from outside have made of the sight. America has long been a metaphor and a sounding board for many external commentators and this fact has spawned scholarly studies on its own account (BRADBURY, 1995). John Davis is among those who have investigated new, and perhaps unexpected, modes of encounter of this type. His erudite *The Landscape of Belief: Encountering the Holy Land in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture* looks in detail at "the special relationship with the lands of the Bible" in nineteenth-century America, which saw the nation as "a new Israel" (DAVIS, 1996, p. 3). Davis demonstrates through a wealth of concrete discussion and analysis the diverse ways in which this relationship permeated the landscape paintings of Frederic Edwin Church and other artists of the Hudson River School, as well as how it disseminated itself more widely in the culture and visual production of the period. The strength of Davis' book lies in the individual readings he produces against this wider historical and cultural backdrop.

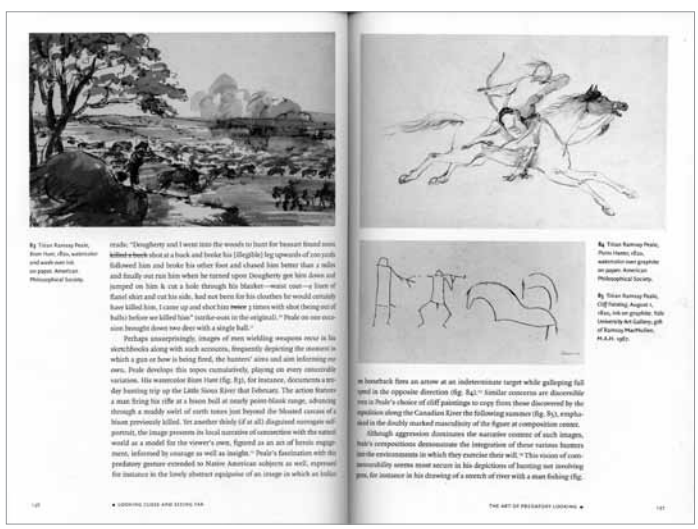
The literary specialist Kate Flint, in her 2009 monograph *The Transatlantic Indian, 1776-1930*, also takes up an unexpected viewpoint, tracing the sustained interaction between Native Americans – whether corporeal or fictional – and British culture, in the service both of revelations about what the Americans' perception of Britain reveals and the ways in which "the notional Indian could be readily adapted […] to demonstrate a great range of clichés, presuppositions, considered analyses, and hypotheses about the nature […] of the United States and the Americas more broadly" (FLINT, 2009, p. 24). Flint uncovers a number of unexpected and telling histories through this focus, which operates in both transatlantic directions and offers acute perspectives on a number of British and American cultures, including "the internal colonial relations of the United States" (FLINT, 2009, p. 296). Flint's book can be seen as a contribution to the emerging interest in the relationship of the art of the United States to that of other and related cultures (GAEHTGENS, 1992; CORBETT, MONKS, 2012). The fact that scholars of American art before 1945 were almost exclusively American themselves was pointed out by Thomas Gaehtgens in the early 1990s (GAEHTGENS, 1992), since when the situation has been mitigated to some extent, although Americans continue to contribute overwhelmingly to the literature (GROSECLOSE, WIERICH, 2009).

If Flint and Davis are concerned with encounter as external, the Americanist Thomas Ruys Smith has spent an extended period investigating the ways in which one of the United States' most important internal frontiers was imagined in the early nineteenth century. His 2007 monograph, *River of Dreams: Imagining the Mississippi before Mark Twain*, traces "the imaginary Mississippi" in antebellum culture as the grand connector of American cultures and geographies in what began as frontier and became the heartlands (SMITH, 2007, p. 12). In a subsequent book, *Southern Queen: New Orleans in the Nineteenth Century*, Smith provides a precise, detailed enquiry into the history and development of a city that encapsulates the cultural variety of American life as it went through multiple revisions in the years following the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 (SMITH, 2011). New Orleans' multiculturalism makes it a significant case for investigation of the flow of exchange across diverse cultural boundaries during the nineteenth century.

Internal boundaries and divisions of this sort, geographical or topological barriers over which American culture leapt during the nineteenth-century, form an important part of the scholarship centering on the nature and extent of encounter. David Miller's *Dark Eden: The Swamp in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (MILLER, 1989) set out a multi-disciplinary

reading of the actual and metaphorical role of the swamp in American culture and imagination during the nineteenth century. Miller identifies an "aestheticisation of the swamp image" during the 1850s and 1860s and a growing "engagement with the landscape in the years around the Civil War" (MILLER, 1989, p. 3). At the same time, and "at the deeper levels of the culture, the swamp emerged as a metaphor of newly awakened unconscious mental processes" (MILLER, 1989, p. 3). Miller reads a large number of literary works as well as paintings in the pursuit of this narrative, drawing together a tightly constructed cultural history of an important aspect of US life incorporating both interior and exterior histories (see also MILLER, 1993, especially the essay MYERS, 1993, for further cultural readings).

A number of studies directly engage the central issues I have laid out about the connections between art and historical meaning. In his 2008 monograph, *Looking Close and Seeing Far: Samuel Seymour, Titian Ramsay Peale, and the Art of the Long Expedition, 1818-1823*, Kenneth Haltman extends the usual reading of encounter by concentrating on two artists whose engagement with the American west at the start of the nineteenth century marked a change in attitudes. Rather than devoting themselves exclusively to the description of American landscape, flora and fauna, and Native Americans, Haltman argues, Peale and Seymour recorded and reflected upon "the process of scientific exploration itself" (HALTMAN, 2008, p. xvii). In the wake of the Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804-1806 to the Pacific coast, which had dispensed with the services of professional artists, the organizers of the 1818-1823 expedition to the west beyond the Mississippi hired Peale as a natural history illustrator, and Seymour as a "Landskip Painter" (HALTMAN, 2008, p. xviii). Haltman demonstrates a deep-seated ambiguity in what was expected of the two artists: on the one hand, they were engaged in the service of scientific recording – geologic, botanical, anthropological – through visual means; on the other, they made many works which step beyond the need to "illustrate" the world in order to engage in representation that "might both involve and thematize" their art's "acts of creative reimagination and redescription" (HALTMAN, 2008, p. xi). Encounter in this context is thus, for Haltman, a dialogic event, involving both taxonomic recording and imaginative re-working, a "productive convergence of scientific and artistic practice just as these arenas of cultural production were attaining new national identity and professional self-consciousness" (HALTMAN, 2008, p. xx). In a series of detailed readings, Haltman traces the interactions between these qualities in the images he recovers from relative obscurity and presents to us in his book (**fig. 13**). The relay in works by Peale or Seymour between scientific description and the attribution of moral meaning, for instance, impels a self-reflective interest in the activities of recording and territorial expansion. This interest not only laid the groundwork for the subsequent appearance of the thematization of national identity and geographical



13. Three works by Titian Ramsay Peale discussed in HALTMAN, 2008, p. 136-137: *Bison Hunt*, 1820 Philosophical Society; *Plains Hunter*, 1820, American Philosophical Society; *Cliff Painting*, August 1, 1820, Yale University Art Gallery, gift of Ramsay MacMullen, M.A.H. 1967.

14. Thomas Cole, *Ruined Tower (Mediterranean Coast Scene with Tower)*, c. 1832-1836, New York, Albany Institute of History and Art.

extension in the landscape school that began with Thomas Cole a few years later but also offers a reflection on the psychic violence that attends such "acts of knowing" (HALTMAN, 2008, p. 198; **fig. 14**).

This question is given an unusual treatment in Alexander Nemerov's subtle and intellectually adventurous 2010 book, *Acting in the Night: Macbeth and the Places of the Civil War*. Nemerov's interest is in the power of the aesthetic to connect the individual with the wider flow of historical experience. In *Acting in the Night*, he deals with encounter both as an aesthetic event and as historical, even adventitious, connections between disparate individuals and occasions. Methodologically innovative, Nemerov builds his book around a performance of *Macbeth* that took place at Grover's National Theatre in Washington, D.C. on October 17, 1863. For his study the play is "a place, even a Thing in Martin Heidegger's sense" because it can be read as positing that art can encompass "a whole world – a social world as well as a natural one" (NEMEROV, 2010, p. 5). The play, staged at a critical point of the Civil War and in a location which symbolized the division of South from North at the crossing of the Potomac River into Virginia, asserts the value of the aesthetic. But "the war inevitably worked to splinter that space into a great disarray […] in which every death […] became a bloody spot […] resisting all grandiosities of national explanation" (NEMEROV, 2010, p. 5-6). It thus posits the issue of aesthetic work and historical circumstance in a particularly vivid way. To what extent can the claims of aesthetic objects to elucidate the terms of experience in the world be upheld in conditions where the force of history is so powerful? This is a metaphorical version of contact to be sure, but its linkage of aesthetic event and the "social" and ideological "worlds" of which it is a part, and which flow through it and out again into the wider and foreign world, raises the larger question of aesthetics and historical circumstances I have already raised. Nemerov takes up this central issue of the power of aesthetic experience and aesthetic event to be part of, or even influence, the alien world of the Other. In the end, Nemerov finds the "relations between art and daily life" to be not about the "context" that "shapes the work of art," but rather to be "enigmatic," subject to interventions that render claims in favor of the completeness and totality of understanding that art advances suspect and debatable (p. 177). Such an intervention, marking the moment when the necessary ambition of art "draws the eye again and again," is defined best as a fluidity, a promise, a possibility, rather than anything like a concrete or straightforward interchange (p. 177-179). Neither history nor aesthetics are autonomous, and neither takes priority over the other; instead, both jointly constitute a set of potentialities that circulates between the two.

At the end of this section, it is worth noting that a leading scholar of American art, Sarah Burns, has proposed a different border against which Americans of the nineteenth century came to encounter other worlds and other versions of their own, familiar world. In Burns' 2004

15. John Quidor, *Headless Horseman Pursuing Ichabod Crane*, 1858, Smithsonian American Art Museum.

book, *Painting the Dark Side: Art and the Gothic Imagination in Nineteenth-Century America*, she offers us a different view of the canon of American art, one that concentrates on the Gothic elements within the national story and the national psyche, "a radically alternative vision of America, haunted by specters of otherness: psychological, familial, social, and especially racial" (BURNS, 2004, p. xix; **fig. 15**). Burns' summary of her position is worth citing at length: "The gothic is a mode of pictorial expression that critiques the Enlightenment vision of the rational American Republic as a place of liberty, balance, harmony, and progress. Gothic pictures are meditations on haunting and being haunted: by personal demons, social displacement (or misplacement), or the omnipresent specter of slavery and race. They explore the irrational realms of vision, dream and nightmare, and they grapple with the terror of annihilation by uncontrollable forces of social conflict and change" (BURNS, 2004, p. xix).

This is a vision of America and its art that does not depend entirely on its exceptional character. On the contrary, Burns' America shares with both Britain and Europe a moment of ontological and psychic instability that is given form in the Gothic. The world is not readily ordered and described, but is rather a series of imagined boundaries against which experience pushes and which it overturns and subverts. Encounter here is a darker and more pervasive thing than the contact with other cultures, other places, or other futures is often taken to be. But it is also an internal encounter, a response to the complex and problematic energies of American life that circulate within the individual psyche as well as on the national stage. For Burns, the art of nineteenth-century America posits these bleaker readings as fully as it posits an optimistic future for the new world it imagines into being.

This is perhaps a helpful moment to return to one of the questions with which I began. As I have argued, the art historical problem posed by the question of encounter in part concerns the way in which the historical circumstances of encounter or contact find a place in individual works of art. For Manthorne, for example, writing in 1989, the answer to this question was to place the works within the context of American history and the making of the nation, a forceful and compelling reading that has dominated the study of historic American art and which is related to the question of – and the questioning of – exceptionalism discussed at the start of this essay. For Haltman, whose book appeared in 2008, the question is re-worked on a different scale. It is no longer a question of setting the making of art within the context of nation building. Instead, picking up the self-consciousness and potential for critical stances already discussed by scholars such as Manthorne, Haltman and others concentrate on the processing of experience and the breadth of potential meanings

inherent in the historical conditions within which artists made representations. The borders of experience that are in question here are both external – the impulse to traverse and intellectually account for the North American landmass – and internal – the need to question and reformulate the possibilities of representation in that endeavor. In the dialogue between those interior and exterior imperatives, the issues I have discussed – of encounter, of the frontier, of self and Other, and of nature and the natural world – persist as tensions generated along the borders, both geographical and imagined, of a country in a mutable and perennially unfinished but potential state. In this way, American nineteenth-century art and culture takes part in a wider, transnational context of reformulation and examination. The scholarly literature that has examined these issues in nineteenth-century America responds to this dynamic and multiple situation of "cross-cultural exchange" (MILLER *et al.*, 2008, p. xii).

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